

We are not just academics

LETTERS

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MUCH has been said about the areas that we need to reform in order to improve the quality of our education system. Perhaps one thing that we could also do is encourage a healthy work-life balance among academics.

Recently, we, early career academics at a public university, were invited to attend a special meeting with a professor who spoke about the university's research ideals and the way forward. Among other matters, he revealed that he has, and will continue to have, a full schedule until mid-next year with teaching, research, surgeries (he is a top surgeon in the country), community engagements and the university's flagship project.

Many of us think that the session was inspiring but slightly problematic. This is because he failed to acknowledge that while he's climbing the academic ladder by working on all those big and important things, there's someone else who has been carrying the household, someone who puts his children to bed when he's in a long surgery until late at night, someone who sits next to a child with a 40 degree fever, who gets his children ready for school when he is already on the road for his 7am lectures, and who is there with his children on his behalf when he is with the community; then there are the very patient family members who accept that he will not be able to attend gatherings or when he has to leave the weekend kenduri early to focus on his research – these are his understanding wife, parents, in-laws and friends.

Working hard is important but our obsession with working hard 24/7 is ruining our productivity and sanity.

Those who are already at the top of the ladder might just say, "Well, if I could do it, so can you". This "If I can do it, you can do it too" attitude is powerful. It emphasises the feasibility of something (ie, A is not impossible). It realises a person's full potential (ie, you can certainly do A).

But as well-intentioned as the sentiment might be, we must also admit that it isn't always helpful. Basing an argument solely on personal experience is fallacious. This is because such evidence cannot be used to make general statements that apply to everyone or in every circumstance.

We are unique humans as opposed to robots manufactured in the same factory. We cannot turn a blind eye to the concept of individual personhood or that each of us has our own complex and multi-dimensional issues to deal with.

Some of us early-career academics who have a young child are scared to even think about having a second child because we don't know if we can do justice to our responsibilities.

We don't want our husbands to always have to take the backseat because of our careers. Our husbands need to join us in the front seats to build our family and careers at the same time. Some of us refuse to give our privileges as mothers to helpers or ask them to care for our own flesh and blood beyond 10 hours a day.

So academics like us come as a package.

It is unjust to see us solely as academics whose "hobbies" are only doing research, publishing and engaging with the community. We are also wives, mothers, daughters, sisters and friends, as well as part of different communities.

And some of us don't think we want to live up to your ideals because, among others, our children are growing up and we don't want to miss it, our parents are getting older and we don't want to miss spending time with them.

In my department, an external assessor once pointed out that our 12-hour teaching load per week on top of the expectation that we have to do research, consultations, administrative services, and community engagement is very heavy.

We understand, professor, when you say that the demand is greater than supply when we have more students than lecturers. But all of us know the repercussions of this – not only for us but also for the quality of work and our students – even though we don't really talk about it.

But don't get us wrong. Most of us love this profession with a passion. However, the quantification of scholarship, with its impossible demands and meaningless metrics, is creating perverse incentives and an unhealthy atmosphere. "Because not everything that counts, can be counted (attributed to Albert Einstein)."

As much as we love our "hobbies" (read: career), we have to learn to enjoy our free time just as much. It will keep us sane, help us feel like fuller, more integrated citizens and human beings, and unquestionably better people.

We believe that maintaining this discipline over our time will make us better academics and scholars, too. Others agree that open time is actually a critical resource for strong, deep scholarship (Prof A. Murad Merican, for one). So let's also improve our education system by encouraging a healthy work-life balance, not by working 60-70 hours a week!

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